



# Why They Run



An in-depth look at  
America's runaway youth  
presented by the National Runaway Switchboard

May 2010

# Runaway

## Runaway. Throwaway.

These are the terms used to describe America's youth who have left home – albeit willingly and without their family's knowledge (runaway), or reluctantly at the hand of their guardians (throwaway).

It is a reality that is difficult to comprehend in 21<sup>st</sup> Century American culture. As a result, most of society simply denies or ignores that there is a runaway problem. While many are quick to conjure up ideas of a bygone era of what “runaway” means and looks like, America is less attuned to the new set of dangers facing today's youth on much tougher streets. It is hard to acknowledge that children are being classified as “throwaways” – youth who are thrown out of the home by those entrusted to raise and provide for them.

Even the youth who are categorized by these terms do not accept them as accurate descriptors. When life is as immediate as it is transient, tags like these do not stick. But that does not dismiss the problem. And tragically, the problem is getting worse.

It is important to acknowledge that the comprehensive story of America's runaway crisis does not exist, in part because of the difficulty in tracking runaways and the reluctance of youth, families and society in general to fully identify with the issue.

*Why They Run: An in-depth look at America's runaway youth*, presented by the National Runaway Switchboard, sheds new light on the runaway problem in America and begins to fill in the gaps of what is already known and what can be done based on new research. *Why They Run* does the following:

- Considers existing data about the issue through a decade's worth of expert studies;
- Weighs the trend data compiled by the National Runaway Switchboard, which handles more than 100,000 calls annually – an average of 273 calls per day with runaway and at-risk youth, family members and other individuals with questions or concerns about a youth; and
- Examines the one-on-one interviews from America's youth, who are residing in shelters or living “on the street,” about the real and perceived issues when it comes to reaching out for help.

As a result, a stronger picture than ever before is emerging to help answer the question: why do they choose to run? While 83 interviews with youth in Chicago and Los Angeles represent a mere snapshot of the crisis, the feedback is real, raw and in their own words. It is the foundation from which additional research about youth in Chicago and Los Angeles schools is anticipated for release later this year. This is the necessary catalyst to spark more research that will help fill the knowledge gap.

In a world where there are more ways than ever before to stay connected, how is it that youth are becoming so disconnected, and what can be done to respectfully integrate them back into a safe, secure environment or, whenever possible, the fold of a healthy family life?

That's why this report is critically important. To jumpstart new dialogue and collaborate on finding and implementing strategies that reverse the runaway trend. To explore ways of reaching youth that are real, relevant and capable of scaling the walls they have put up for protection and survival.

The roadmap for success – and ultimately reuniting families and/or finding safe places for today's youth – begins here.

# WhyTheyRun

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## Methodology

*Why They Run* is comprised of a three-prong research approach: First, it examines an existing body of research and reports from which to expand upon. The research that has come before has paved the way and provided the opportunity to ask new questions of different interview subjects. Second, *Why They Run* points to the National Runaway Switchboard's Crisis Caller Trends report (April 2010) that analyzed records of crisis calls to 1-800-RUNAWAY for the 10-year period spanning 2000-2009. This NRS report provides perspectives on the individuals in crisis who sought help through 1-800-RUNAWAY. Prior research and the NRS Trend Report have unique methodologies consistent with their objectives and are outlined in their respective reports.

The final component is the new research conducted with youth on the street and in shelters. Below is the detailed methodology employed to develop this element of *Why They Run*.

### Comprehensive research objectives

The interviews with runaway and throwaway youth, which comprise the bulk of this report, are intended to help fill key gaps in the existing body of literature regarding the runaway issue. Rather than focus on the problems of runaways, which are mostly known, this new data focuses on how to get information to these youth and get them connected to the services they need. Toward that end, the comprehensive research conducted to complete this report was designed to examine the following issues:

- Understanding of the decision to run away and gain insights to prevention.
- Determine youth knowledge of available services and how youth access them.
- Determine any barriers, real or perceived, for runaway and at-risk youth in accessing services.
- Assess the best methods to reduce the barriers to accessing services by runaway and at-risk youth.
- Assess marketing and outreach strategies to communicate to runaway and homeless youth.

### Interview subjects

**Youth in shelters.** Youth in shelters who have chosen to access at least one service, the shelter, and represent an important component of runaway youth.

**Youth who live on the street.** Youth who are not using shelters spend their nights in a variety of locations, many of which present various risks. Although they may periodically use shelters, they currently demonstrate their preference not to access a key service.

### Locations and timetable

Interviews took place in Chicago and Los Angeles from October 2008 to January 2010.

### Participating shelters

#### Chicago

- Teen Living Programs (Bronzeville Youth Shelter)
- Youth Outreach Services
- Boys' Town (Father Flanagan's Boy's Home)

#### Los Angeles

- Catholic Charities' Angel's Flight
- Los Angeles Youth Network

Methodology

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## Eligibility

To be eligible for the sample, youth had to be between ages 14-17 inclusive. Although the runaway and homeless youth population includes young adults in their early twenties, the focus was placed on youth under the age of 18 who have run away or been thrown out of their homes. Those aged 18 or over were purposely avoided as they typically do not have the same concerns of underage youth who might worry that service providers would return them to their parents or call the police. Underage youth may also have different perceptions about what services are available to them as minors.

To qualify for the street sample, youth were to have been away from home for at least 48 hours or two nights. For the shelter sample, this requirement was relaxed to allow for youth who decided to come immediately to a shelter instead of spending time on the street or with friends. For the most part, the sample captures youth who have been away from home for an extended period of time and most have runaway histories. No quotas for any age, race/ethnicity, or gender were created.

## Interview process

Surveys were conducted one-on-one with youth in shelters or “on the street,” defined as living anywhere other than a shelter or parents’ (or guardians’) home in an unstable living situation. Two people conducted all of the interviews with one person conducting all of the interviews in Los Angeles, the majority of shelter interviews in Chicago, and three of the street interviews in Chicago.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the youth’s permission and transcribed for analysis. The protocol left all the questions open-ended, allowing the youth to tell their story. After the fact, a coding frame was developed that allowed the open-ended responses to be reduced to a set of responses. Since interviews can take all kinds of twists and youth may veer sharply from the purpose of the question, not every response could be coded into the created framework. However, the vast number of interviews provides a solid picture of the lives and thoughts of these youth.

Each interview took approximately 45-90 minutes and gathered information about the runaway event itself as well as the circumstances in the youth’s life precipitating the runaway episode. Each youth was also asked to fill out a short self-administered questionnaire with basic demographic information and simpler versions of questions that would be asked in the full interview. This short questionnaire was filled out prior to the one-on-one interview to avoid contamination of responses so that shelter and street samples can be compared with a more general sample of youth in schools as part of future planned research. Youth were paid \$30 for their participation.

Street interviews took place in a variety of locations including restaurants and coffee shops, the beach, drop-in centers, alleys, parks, cars, and literally on the street. Street youth were found by approaching youth in various areas where homeless youth are known to congregate, by having the youth identified as appropriate at a drop-in center, by fliers put up around town with a 1-800 number for youth to call, and by going out with street outreach teams.

## Runaway youth sample

The runaway youth sample includes two distinct groups: youth who have sought service (shelter sample), and youth who may or may not have ever sought a service (street sample). The combined sample includes 83 runaway youth, 40 in Chicago and 43 in Los Angeles. In each site, 20 youth were interviewed in shelters. In Chicago, 16 of those interviews were conducted at Teen Living Programs, three were conducted at the offices of Youth Outreach Services, and one was conducted at Boys’ Town. In Los Angeles, 19 interviews were conducted at L.A. Youth Network and one at Angel’s Flight. In Chicago, 20 street youth were interviewed, 17 of whom were interviewed at the Broadway Youth Center. In Los Angeles, 23 street youth were interviewed.

## What Is Already Known

According to the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART-2), approximately 1.7 million youth experienced an episode of running away or being thrown away in 1999 (Hammer, Finkelhor and Sedlack, 2002). While this is just one estimate, the estimated range suggests things could be even worse, with between **1.6 and 2.8 million youth** experiencing a runaway/throwaway episode annually.

Today, kids are still running – and being thrown out – at an alarming rate. The National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) Crisis Caller Trends report (April 2010), documenting crisis calls from 2000-2009, reveals an escalating trend line.

- *The number of homeless youth calling the 1-800-RUNAWAY crisis line has increased dramatically over the past year (98.9 percent) – a jump from 739 calls to 1,470 calls – and the number of homeless youth calling NRS has been increasing every year since 2000. This reflects a 584 percent increase.*
- *Similarly, “throwaway” youth calling 1-800-RUNAWAY has increased 21 percent in the last year, 48 percent over the past three years, and 68 percent from 2000-2009.*

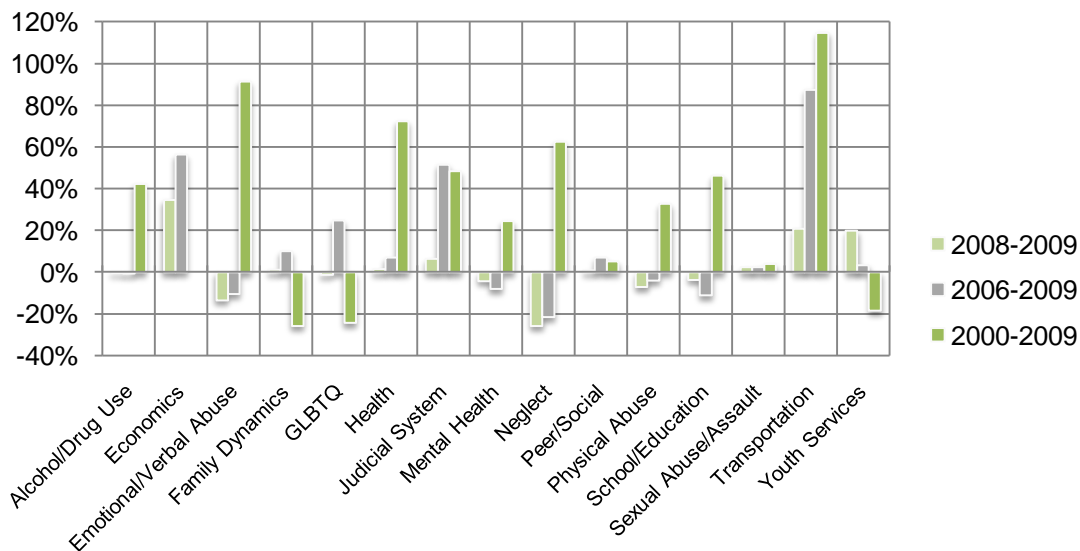
This is what is known about these youth.

### Family dynamics fuel leaving

Runaway youth are likely to come from high-conflict home environments that may or may not include a history of problems such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or neglect (Kaufman & Widom, 1999). NRS trend data reveals that family dynamics (divorce, remarriage, problems with siblings), cited by 29 percent of crisis callers, far outweigh any other reason for leaving, but this figure is on the decline, down 26 percent from 2000-2009. All forms of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, verbal and neglect) are down eight percent for the past three years and 11 percent over last year.

### NRS Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Youth Crisis Caller Problems 2000-2009

(Based on a combined sample of 454,717 for all 10 years)



## Economic realities

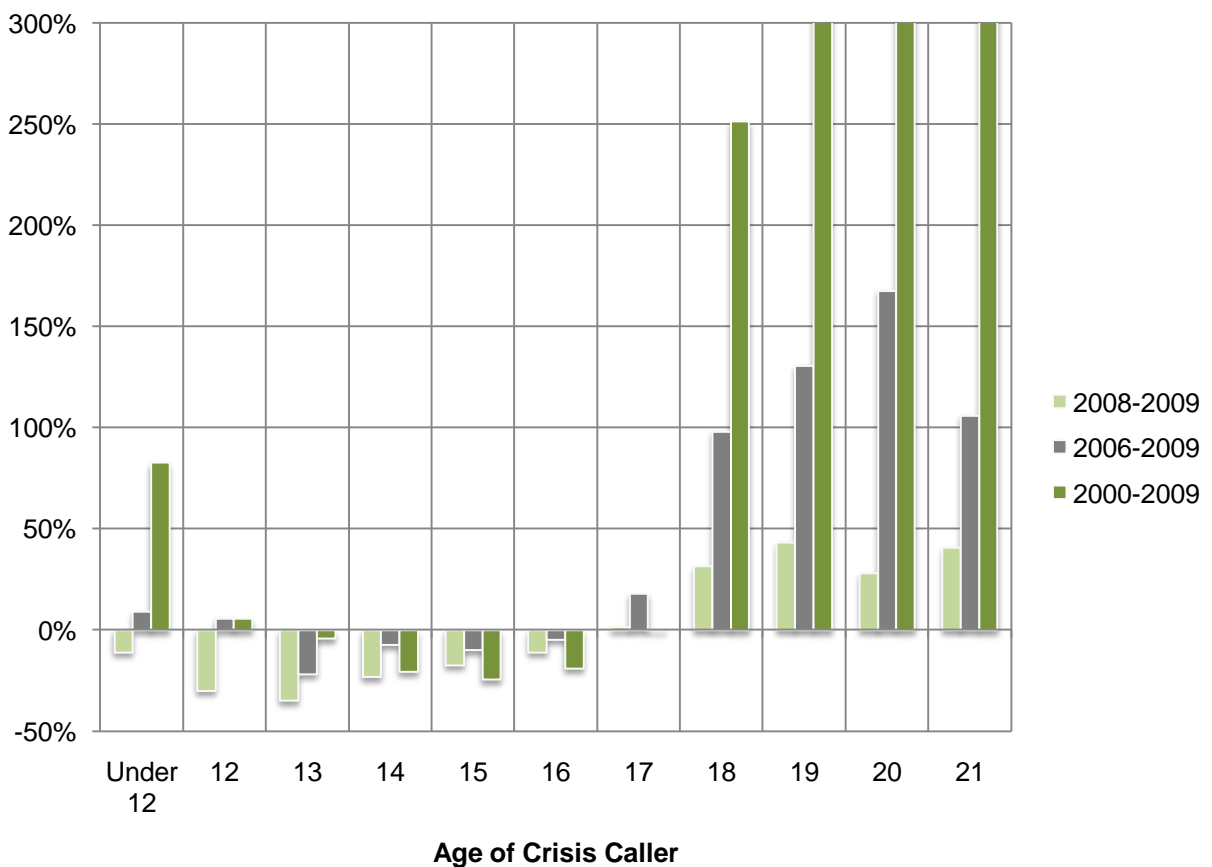
While trends related to family dynamics are heading in the right direction, the economy presents a growing problem. From 2001-2009, there has been an increase of more than 494 percent in crisis calls that cite the economy as a reason for leaving. Last year alone witnessed a 35 percent increase in callers reporting economics as a problem.

## Running at all ages

The pathway to the streets may be different for children who leave home at different ages. "Examinations of these paths in future research will serve to elucidate the important warning signs that predict a young person's move to the streets. This kind of research would provide valuable insight about what kind of interventions might help youth to maintain a stable residence while tackling the other problems they might face." (Cauce, 2000, p.8).

NRS trend data reveals that, indeed, youth are running at all ages of adolescence. However, growth rates are accelerating quicker in the very young (under 12) and those age 18 and above in comparison to ages in between. Calls from youth under 12 in 2009 increased 89 percent over 2000. In addition, the category of crisis callers age 18 to 21 has increased by 470 percent from 2000-2009.

**NRS Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in Age of Crisis Caller 2000-2009**  
(Based on a combined sample of 70,115 for all 10 years)



*NOTE: In order to show the details of this entire graph, the categories of ages 19-21 were cut off for the trend period 2000-2009. The figures for these categories are as follows age 19 had a 4,635 percent increase, age 20 had a 7,636 percent increase, and age 21 had a 3,630 percent increase.*

## Gender is not a key factor

Surprisingly, the propensity for males versus females to run is largely the same. According to Hammer, Finkelhor and Sedlak (2002), runaway youth are 50 percent male and 50 percent female, though females are more likely to seek help through shelters and hotlines than males. This point also is evidenced by the NRS trend data with 72 percent of crisis calls to 1-800-RUNAWAY coming from females. However, during the last decade the percent increase of male (33 percent) to female (14 percent) crisis calls has more than doubled.

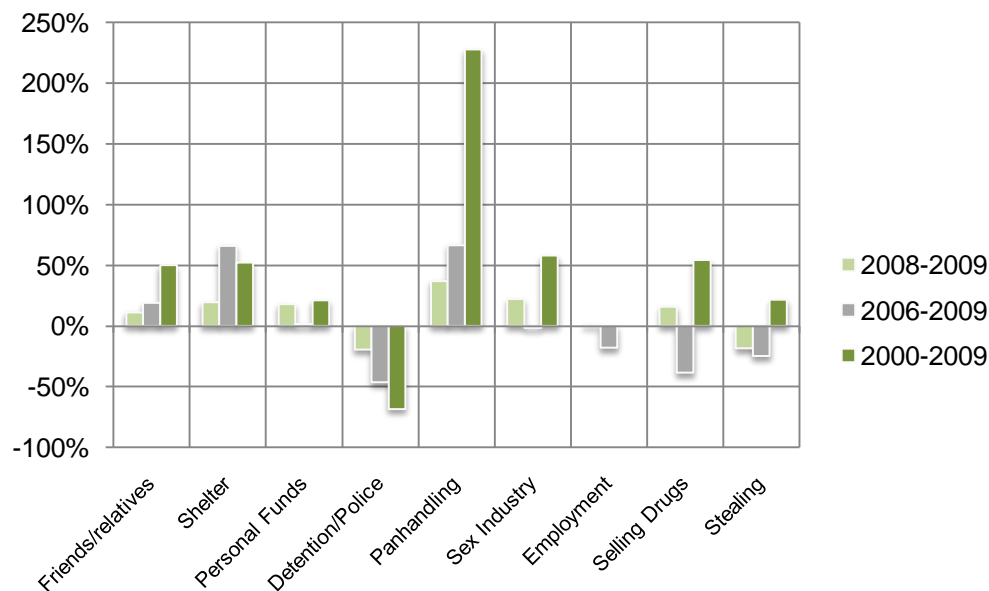
**NRS Crisis Caller Gender**  
(Based on a combined sample of 120,485 for all 10 years)

Gender	Percent Change 2006-2009	Percent Change 2000-2009
Female	1.3%	14.1%
Male	20.9%	33.7%

## How they get by

First and foremost, youth rely on friends and relatives for basic needs more so than any other means of survival. In fact, NRS caller data demonstrates that in 2009, 73 percent of youth turned to extended family or friends, while only 10 percent relied on shelters. Of more serious concern is the rise in more dangerous activity. Although the percentages in contrast are low, the percentage increase since 2000 is notable: panhandling (228 percent), the sex industry (58 percent), selling drugs (54 percent) stealing (22 percent).

**Trend Analysis of Percentage Change in NRS Crisis Caller Means of Survival 2000-2009**  
(Based on a combined sample of 53,384 for all 10 years)



## Where are they when calling for help?

The largest proportion of crisis callers to NRS in 2009 (35 percent) called from home. The number of youth calling from home has also increased 35 percent from 2000-2009. This reinforces the conclusion that NRS is reaching more youth before they run away from home. Factor in friends (26 percent) and relatives (nine percent) and a reasonable assumption can be made that 70 percent of callers reached out from home or home-like environments. Conversely, there has been a decrease in the number of youth calling from police/detention by 55 percent from 2000-2009. During this same period, there has been a 103 percent increase in the number of youth who have called NRS from school.

The past decade has produced a small body of data through studies about runaway and at-risk youth, much of which is cited in the comprehensive research that is the basis for this report. The existing body of research, coupled with NRS' Crisis Caller Trends report, is the foundation of what is known. By pointedly asking runaways and throwaways why they ran, this report begins to fill in the gaps that currently exist.

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To access the *National Runaway Switchboard (NRS) Crisis Caller Trends report (April 2010)*, or the comprehensive research report with additional cited literature, research and sources, go to [www.1800RUNAWAY.org](http://www.1800RUNAWAY.org).

## Why They Run: Perspectives from America's Youth in Shelters and on the Street

***“One in five youth run away before reaching age 18, and half run away two or more times.”***

*Pergamit, Michael R. “On the Lifetime Prevalence of Running Away from Home,” Urban Institute Research Brief*

This is a staggering statistic. Imagine your son or daughter, niece or nephew in a classroom full of children. Is the child you love among the 20 percent who will someday run? If not yours, then whose?

Understanding *what* leads youth to the decision to run is critical to understanding *how* to provide the necessary services – services that ultimately curtail multiple episodes and prevent at-risk youth from running in the first place.

To get to that point requires a clearer understanding of who is running and why. Of the youth interviewed in Chicago and Los Angeles, both in shelters and on the street, this is what was discovered:

### Runaway or throwaway?

- Thirty percent of the youth explicitly described what happened as running away.
- Nearly half (48 percent) said they were thrown out of their homes.
- Twenty-two percent described the situation as both, some combination of running away and being thrown out.



## Runaway vs. throwaway based on age, gender, sexual identity, shelter or street life

- Youth in the street sample identified themselves as having run away on their current episode more often than did youth in the shelter sample.
- Age did not make a difference among those who claimed to have run away.
- Females said they ran away less than males.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) youth ran more often than heterosexual youth, and claimed to have been thrown out less often than heterosexual youth.

### Youth's categorization as runaways or throwaways by subgroup

	Ran away	Thrown out	Both
Shelter sample	20.0%	57.5%	22.5%
Street sample	39.5%	39.5%	20.9%
14-15 yrs	30.8%	53.8%	15.4%
16 yrs	30.0%	50.0%	20.0%
17 yrs	30.0%	46.0%	24.0%
Male	37.8%	44.4%	17.8%
Female	21.2%	54.5%	24.2%
Heterosexual	26.0%	54.0%	20.0%
GLBTQ	36.4%	39.4%	24.2%

*Note: Gender excludes five youth who identified themselves as transgender*

## Reasons they run

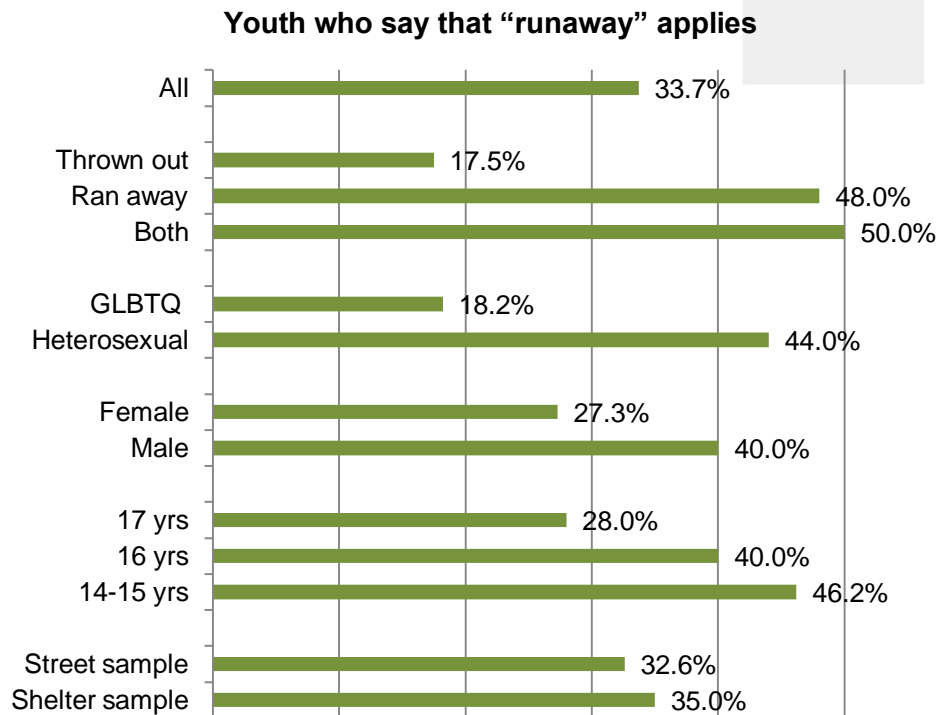
- Youth commonly describe a significant family conflict that led to the youth's departure.
- Some situations indicate a parent has insisted the youth leave.
- Other cases indicate the youth should leave and the youth feels s/he has no choice, though it is unclear that the parent has insisted.
- In many situations, family conflict has existed for a period of some time, resulting in a series of episodes, some where the youth explicitly ran away, others where the parent clearly threw the youth out of the house. Over time, the distinction becomes fuzzy in the mind of the youth.
- For GLBTQ youth, some parents can't accept their child's sexual orientation and throw them out of the house. Other youth remain in the home, but face difficulties due to lack of acceptance within their families, which may lead them to run.

## Not easily labeled: how runaway youth view themselves

The term "runaway" is not one that is quickly embraced in part because it does more than describe the act of running away. It labels the individual, and many youth felt it reflected a judgment of them as a bad person – someone unappreciative of having a home and family.

- Only one-third of youth interviewed considered the term "runaway" as an accurate description.
- Older youth and females were less likely to consider themselves as a runaway.

- GLBTQ youth were significantly less likely to identify with the runaway label compared to heterosexual youth.
- Those who consider themselves “thrown out” did not consider themselves as runaways.
- Only half who report they ran away actually consider themselves a runaway.
- Similarly, only half of those who describe their episode as a combination consider themselves as a runaway.



When asked to describe themselves, youth offered nearly 30 different statements and terms, including the following:

*A runaway with permission*

*A lost child in need of help*

*Looking for a better chance*

*An independent person*

*A rebellious teenager*

*A person that needs space*

*Living on my own*

*I feel like I wasn't accepted*

*I was disowned*

*Neglected*

*Lock out*

*Squatter*

*Vagabond*

*Gypsy*

*Drifter*

*Traveler*

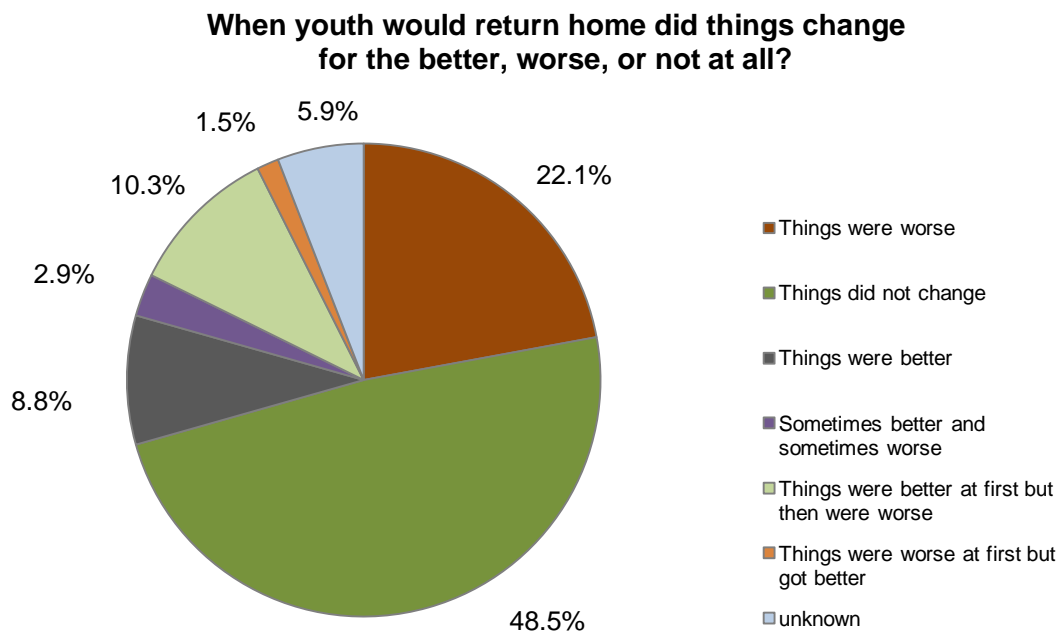
*Street kid*

*Homeless*

## On Leaving Home

Household structure provides a glimpse into the living environment at the time the youth left home. Seventy-three percent of the youth were living with one or more biological parents at the time they left home, with one-quarter living with both biological parents. The remaining youth reported living with grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings or others, including foster care.

Recognizing that half of all runaways will likely run two or more times, the opportunity exists to understand what, if anything, changed after returning home. Youth interviewed who had run previously and returned home reported, in general, that things remained the same (which is to say “bad”) or became worse. However, since this sample is with youth currently on a runaway/throwaway episode, they are less likely to report that conditions improved.



### A planned departure?

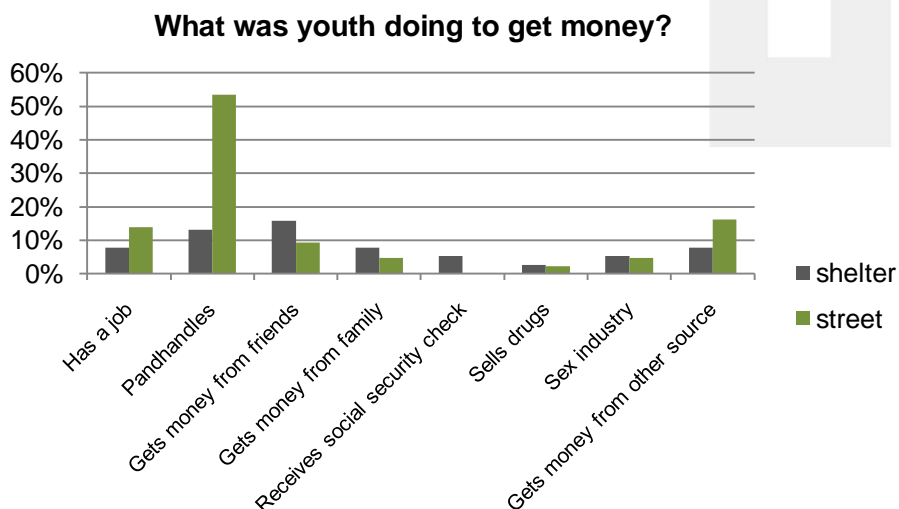
More than 70 percent of youth interviewed described their leaving home as occurring on the spur of the moment. Thirty-six percent who ran said they planned it in advance, while 23 percent who were thrown out said they expected to be thrown out and planned to run anyway.

- Fifty-six percent of youth who said they ran away also said that someone else knew they were planning to run away.

Youth who planned ahead were far more likely to pack a bag, obtain money and call a friend compared to those who left in the spur of the moment. However, 78 percent of all youth had either \$10, or less, or no money at all upon leaving.

## What they'll do for money

This places 63 percent of youth, regardless if on the street or in a shelter, in a position of doing something to get money. Means reportedly ranged from getting a job, obtaining money from friends or family, social security check, the sex industry, selling drugs or some other source. Nearly 35 percent of all youth resorted to panhandling, the single-most popular means of obtaining money.



## The first 48 hours

The majority of youth (59 percent) report staying in their metropolitan area, while 26 percent stay in the neighborhood. Fifty-six percent stay at the home of a friend or relative the first night and often the second night. First-to-second night stays look fairly similar across all reported options, some of which are geographically specific to L.A. (beach) and Chicago (train). While runaway youth sleep in a variety of places after leaving home, the most common is a friend's house, which 77 percent have spent at least one night. Places youth spend their days is not dissimilar to where they choose to spend the night.

### Where did youth spend the night away from home?

	first night	second night
Boyfriend's home	3.7%	5.0%
Girlfriend's home	1.2%	3.8%
Friend's home	42.7%	33.8%
Relative's home	8.5%	12.5%
On the train	6.1%	10.0%
Just walking around	1.2%	0.0%
In the park	8.5%	5.0%
At the beach	2.4%	6.3%
Squat	1.2%	1.3%
Abandoned building	3.7%	1.3%
Rooftop	2.4%	0.0%
Hospital	1.2%	1.3%
Shelter	3.7%	5.0%
Another place indoors	3.7%	3.8%
Another place outdoors	9.8%	11.3%

## Time spent away from home

The youth interviewed for this report have been away for various lengths of time ranging from those who just left the home to those who have been living on the street for more than two years. The youth interviewed on the street were slightly more likely to have been away longer. However, it is possible that time away from home could be longer if there is a history of being away from home.

## Seeking shelter

Nearly 54 percent of youth who go to a shelter do so because they have run out of places to stay or are just tired of being on their own.

Youth find out about shelters in ways that differ by city. In Chicago, youth are likely to hear about a shelter from police (to whom youth must report before some shelters will accept them) or from a service provider such as Youth Outreach Services, while youth in L.A. most often identified a friend as telling them about the shelter.

Only 15 percent of interviewed youth reported finding their way to a shelter on their own.

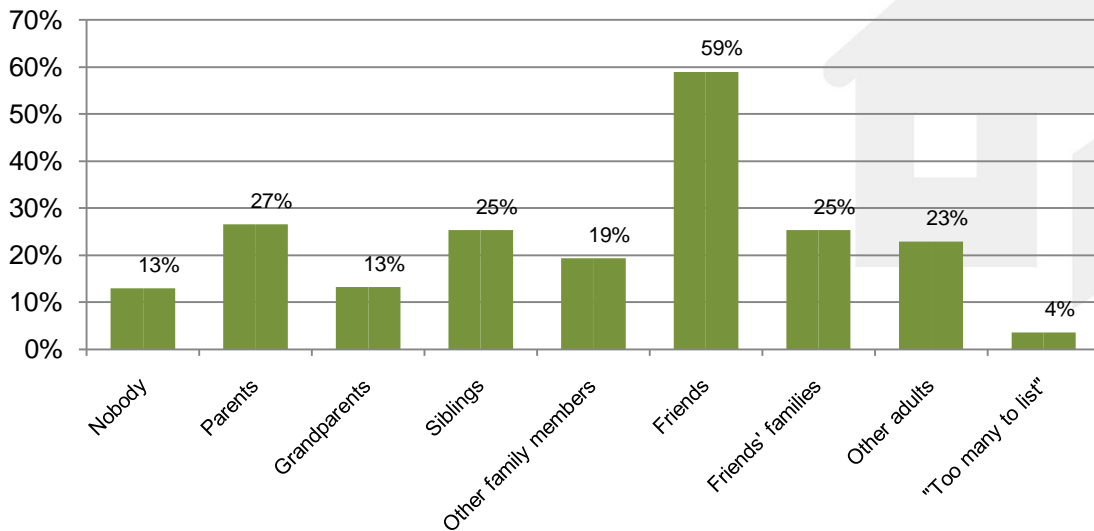
### How did youth hear about this shelter?

	Chicago	LA	Total
Police	25%	5%	15.0%
School Official	10%	5%	7.5%
Parent	5%	5%	5%
Relative (not parent)	0%	5%	2.5%
Friend	10%	35%	22.5%
Another shelter	10%	15%	12.5%
Drop-in center	0%	5%	2.5%
Other service provider	30%	15%	22.5%
Internet	10%	0%	5%
Phone book / yellow pages	0%	5%	2.5%
other	0%	5%	2.5%

## On Staying Connected

Most youth are in some way connected to family or friends while they are away from home. More than half report that friends know where they are, while 26 percent have reported that parents and 25 percent have siblings who know their whereabouts. Only 13 percent said that nobody knew where they were.

## Who knew where youth was while away from home?



Nearly 45 percent of youth attended school, with 70 percent attending regularly. This concentration is more common among shelter youth who have a place to stay and because shelters may help facilitate getting to school. Nearly two-thirds of shelter youth attended school, while 28 percent of street youth continued attending school. A youth's engagement in school helps to validate the high number of friends aware of their whereabouts. Nearly 22 percent report some level of involvement in a church, with 14 percent attending worship services while away from home.

### In touch through technology

From cell phones to e-mail to social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, technology tools provide legitimate means of staying connected while youth are away from home.

#### Cell phones

- Fifty-eight percent of youth had access to a cell phone at least some of the time, and 20 percent had their own phone.
- Cell phone access increases with age. More than one-third of 14- and 15-year olds report having access; 60 percent of 16-year olds, and 63 percent of 17-year olds.
- Two-thirds of street youth report having cell phone access some of the time.

#### E-mail

- Seventy-one percent of youth report having access to e-mail.
- Of those with access, 73 percent access e-mail at least once a week and 34 percent access e-mail daily.
- Youth obtain access via school, public libraries, shelters, drop-in centers or a friend's home.

#### Social networking sites

- Seventy-five percent of youth have a MySpace account and 22 percent have an account on Facebook; all but one Facebook user also had a MySpace account.
- More than half access their account weekly, with social networking sites being accessed somewhat less frequently than e-mail.

## Knowledge and Use of Services

Crisis lines, shelters, drop-in centers, street outreach, health and treatment centers – these represent a sampling of resources able to assist runaway and at-risk youth. But the question is: are youth aware of available services, and if so, why aren't more youth taking advantage of them?

### Do they know help is available?

- Only 19 percent of youth had ever called a crisis line, and only seven percent of street youth had made a call.
- Another 13 percent knew how to find a crisis number.
- Approximately 25 percent of youth had used the Internet to find a service or help, including finding a job.
- For crisis lines, the Internet and phone books were most often cited as likely sources for finding information. However, only one youth reported using the Internet to find a crisis line of any sort.
- Street outreach was acknowledged by 41 percent of youth, but only 10 percent of shelter youth had ever encountered street outreach.
- Youth tend to learn about available services by word-of-mouth; they predominantly turn to friends as the most common cited source of information for most services.

### Reasons for not using available services

Among the full range of services raised with youth that were interviewed, three main reasons for not accessing available services were given on a consistent basis:

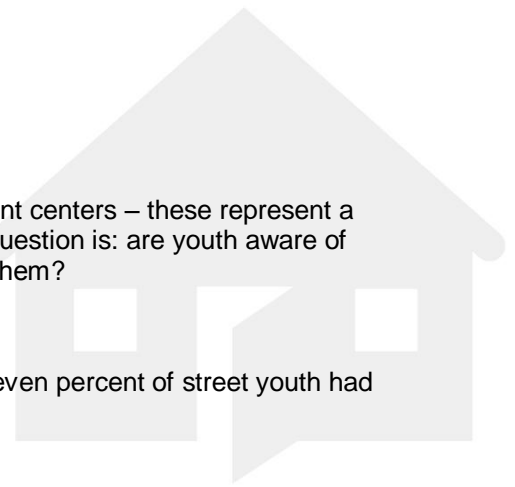
- They do not feel they need it
- They do not know where to find it
- They did not know such services existed

More specifically, 36 percent of youth who had not used a shelter said they did not need services and 24 percent did not know where to find them. Another 10 percent noted that they were afraid for their safety in a shelter.

One-third of youth who had not called a crisis line said they did not need it, while another one-third did not know how to find a crisis line.

Additional reasons youth gave for not taking advantage of services include:

- Embarrassment and feeling of being judged
- Pride and the desire to make it on their own; using services would be admitting they are failures
- Rules and constraints such as curfews and barriers (10 percent)
- Half of all interviewed youth feared being turned over to “the authorities”
  - Parents (20 percent)
  - Police (23 percent)
  - Children and family services (15 percent)



## Knowledge of NRS and 1-800-RUNAWAY

The National Runaway Switchboard operates 1-800-RUNAWAY, the oldest hotline of its kind in the world, and provides crisis intervention, referrals to local resources, and education and prevention services to youth and family members throughout the country 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. In essence, this is the one number that runaway and at-risk youth could access to get the confidential help and connect them to area resources. The question is do they know about it – and do they trust it?

### Are they aware of 1-800-RUNAWAY?

- Forty-two percent of youth interviewed had heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY with little difference between shelter and street youth.

However, few youth have a real understanding of what 1-800-RUNAWAY can do for them.

- Youth who had heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY were just as likely as those who had not heard of the hotline to say they do not know what it does, gives a general “they help you” response, or gives an entirely inaccurate description.

In the following verbatim responses, youth reveal their concerns about why they choose not to call 1-800-RUNAWAY (embarrassment, pride, fear) as previously mentioned.

*“They probably take you back home. Or they’ll try to put you in somewhere you don’t want to be.”*

*“They contact the police. They take you to a shelter.”*

*“They either try to get ’em home or try to talk ’em into going home. This might just be me being weird, but they probably call the authorities and send them to where they are and take ’em home.”*

*“Probably, probably get put in foster care or taken back to their parents, or taken to a relative that can take care of them, or just helped out in some way. I don’t know.”*

*“I mean, I’m not sure if they would either try to turn me in or try to help me for the moment being, it’s kind of hard to say. It’s a hard shot to call, I’d have to be really lucky for them not to turn me in...”*

### Using and connecting with 1-800-RUNAWAY

Much like other services, there are various reasons and circumstances that determine why youth do not call 1-800-RUNAWAY, including:

- No need to call a crisis line if living with friends or if a youth feels self-sufficient.
- Had previously heard of 1-800-RUNAWAY (via school or advertisement), but did not remember it existed at their time of leaving.
- If they were thrown out, they did not think it would help their circumstances.
- Concerned that the authorities would be called in to get them.
- Thought 1-800-RUNAWAY only reunited families, and the youth was not interested in reuniting.



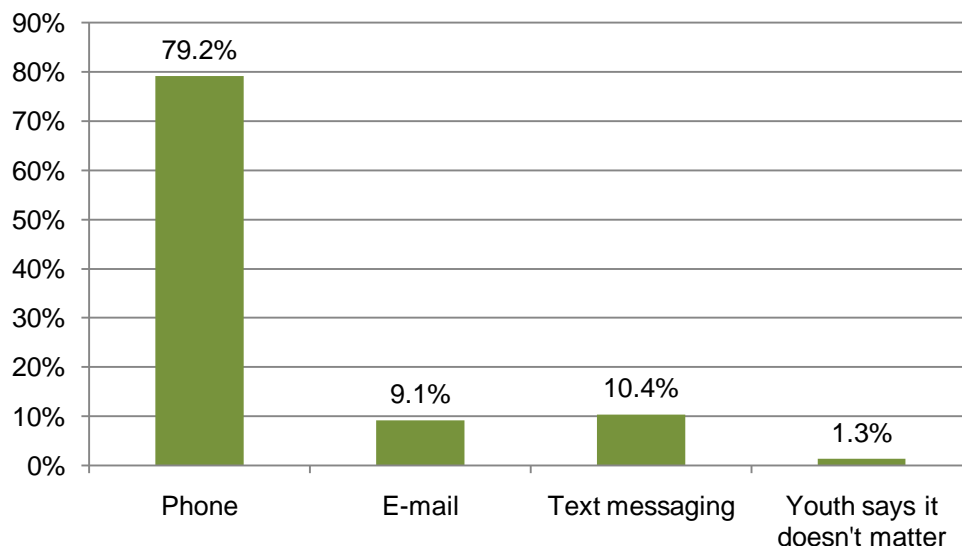
## Preferred method of contact

Despite the proliferation of new communication technology, youth overwhelmingly preferred to talk directly via telephone instead of e-mail and text messaging.

***Nearly 80 percent wanted to talk to a person to determine if that person sounded like they really intended to be helpful.***

Youth felt that e-mail was not direct enough and they would have to wait for a response, and e-mail and texting would not convey urgency or their needs effectively. E-mail requires computer access but phones are more readily accessible.

**Would youth prefer phone, e-mail, or text messaging?**



## Concerns and beliefs about anonymity

Youth split fairly equally on whether or not it would be important for a crisis line to know who he or she is or from where he or she is calling.

- More so than any group, females feel anonymity is important (70 percent).
- Younger youth find it more important to remain anonymous than older youth.

Nearly 43 percent of interviewed youth would not believe it even if a hotline stated their calls are anonymous. Only 30 percent would believe the claim, with the remaining quarter being unsure.

Those who thought they could be convinced considered what would have to happen on the call. They noted such things as judging the honesty of the person they were speaking to by the person's voice and by what the person said. And if the person answering the phone made it clear up front that they were not recording the call or using caller-ID, the youth would believe them.

# Anonymity

## Runaway and At-Risk Youth Offer Improvements

Youth who were interviewed as part of this research were overwhelmingly satisfied with the services they received and felt that most service providers were really trying to be helpful. When they were asked about specific services, they mostly felt that those service providers should keep doing what they are doing.

In some respects, this feedback is to be anticipated, especially among shelter youth who were taking advantage of services at the time of the interview. It is also plausible they were saying what they thought interviewers wanted to hear, considering they were being paid for their time.

However, when asked how services could be *improved*, youth offered up several suggestions including:

- Treat youth with respect. They come from homes where they did not feel respected and they do not feel respected on the streets.
- Be honest and direct. Do not be insistent, making your suggestions sound like something they must do. This is a turn-off to teens.
- Be sensitive to emotional situations and what youth are going through as it affects their behavior.
- Reduce “processing” requirements and ask for less information – youth on the street have trust issues.
- Better referral process. A long chain of phone calls trying to find the right people to help is not helpful.
- Make clear youth will not be turned over to parents/authorities.

### Not enough information available

- Many youth mentioned that there is not enough information available. They felt that if there was not an immediate need they would not have reason to know about services. However they thought, in a general way, youth needed to know that services are available. They mentioned frequently that when they were looking for help, they did not know where to look and the people they asked also did not know where to look.
- Small towns may not have much in the way of services, so youth suggested more outreach to these small towns.

### Increase awareness of services

Many youth feel that lack of knowledge about what services exist, what those services can do for them, how to find services, and where to find them, are the biggest barriers to youth getting help. While numerous recommendations for posting information in public places ranged from hospitals and YMCAs to fast food restaurants and “teen hang-outs,” such a scope is neither feasible nor likely to be highly effective. However, one point was reiterated by youth as a clear means of directing youth to helpful services and gets to the heart of the awareness issue:

- Create a centralized list of services to make them easily accessible.

This approach favors a national, high profile point of contact (1-800-RUNAWAY) that can then tailor information locally.

### In-school and online awareness

- Schools were a consensus point of contact for youth. Teachers, guidance counselors and in-school posters were identified as means of communicating information.
- Only a small percentage of youth had used the Internet to find services, yet nearly all felt the Internet in general and social networking sites were key places to provide information on available services, easily accessible by popular search engines.

### On using “runaway” in advertising

- Some youth do not like the term “runaway” or feel it does not apply to them. Even in these cases, many youth still understand who it is aimed at and that includes them.
- Youth felt that rather than worry about labels, materials should focus on what is being offered and make it sound non-threatening.

## Key Takeaways

While there are hundreds of data points and multiple conclusions that individuals can come to when reading the comprehensive research, the following represents just a few key takeaways that rise to the surface and serve as the springboard for a more collaborative, hands-on approach to immediately begin reversing the runaway trend in America.

### There is no substitute for live communication.

Whether via a hotline, in person at a shelter, or dropping in at any health or social service provider, honesty, trust and a sincere desire to help is what youth are seeking. Despite the proliferation of new media tools including social media, nearly 80 percent of interviewed youth want to talk directly with someone who can help, assess if what they are saying is trustworthy (e.g., anonymous and not turning over to police or family). This means that the tools used to drive awareness are not the preferred tools for arriving at solutions (e.g., e-mail, texting), even if they are capable of doing so. Further, while youth may be reluctant to divulge detailed information, the accuracy of information given to youth (based on their situation) and directing them to meaningful and helpful resources is critical to ensuring the initial trust placed in a hotline or resource is validated in the youth’s mind.

### Address the root problems, diffuse the runaway problem.

Existing research, NRS trend data and one-on-one interviews all reveal that the reasons for leaving are many – but also preventable. From family dynamics to abuse and social/peer pressure to problems in school, runaway warning signs masquerade as a litany of other treatable issues. A clear connection among the myriad of social and family problems with an end result of youth runaways and throwaways needs to be made. While it may not be as simple as issues (family/social) equal consequence (runaway/throwaway), a service provider mindset that operates under “issues equal the real possibility of running” can allow for dialogue and preventative measures to occur. The problem may be symptomatic – or it may be the parent/guardian. Parents need help just as much as youth do. And when factoring in that 56 percent of youth tell someone else when they plan to run away, the circle of responsibility grows even wider.

Key Takeaways

WhyTheyRun

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## Heighten awareness by expanding reach, leveraging resources.

More. Better. Faster. From service providers to youth in crisis, it's what everyone wants. However, the truth comes down to simple economics. America's runaway problem is as wide as it is deep – and effectively reaching runaway and at-risk youth in meaningful ways across the country requires human as well as financial capital. Therefore, the answer first lies in being “smarter.” More national and regional partnerships need to be cultivated to encourage solutions that drive top-line awareness among runaway and at-risk youth. And available technology needs to be leveraged to expand access and reach while lowering costs for everyone involved. NRS' school-based *Let's Talk: Runaway Prevention Curriculum* is one example of a working partnership with schools nationwide that can be accelerated to make a greater impact where youth can be assured of hearing the message. More partnerships, better strategic funding, faster solutions. This, in turn, can lead to the greater awareness that is needed.

## Message received: incremental change starts now.

Where and how service providers communicate with runaway and at-risk youth matters. It requires a dialogue instead of a monologue. The message must speak to them – not at them. And it must reach them where they are, before the crisis occurs as well as after they leave. The need for service providers to assess “how we've always done things” is not only necessary, but also vital to keep pace with today's media-saturated youth if the intent is to cut through the clutter and make an impression.

## More research is needed with runaway youth to close the knowledge gap.

The research speaks of 1.6 to 2.8 million runaways/throwaways, but the truth is nobody knows for sure how many youth are without a place to call home. And this is just one data point in the knowledge gap about the runaway issue. This report only begins to shed light on why youth run, yet the small sample provided in these pages gives valuable insight into their decision-making process to leave and rationale youth arrive at for electing to use or decline available services. Additional research is needed to paint a clearer picture, identify trends in behavior and ultimately provide solutions that reverse America's growing runaway crisis.

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Authors of the *Why They Run* report include:

Michael Pergamit, senior research associate, The Urban Institute  
Michelle Ernst, senior researcher, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago  
Jennifer Benoit-Bryan, Ph.D. candidate, University of Illinois-Chicago  
Joel Kessel, president, Kessel Communications

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